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ABSTRACT

Various myths concerning black women and their educational status are examined, with current statistics provided to indicate their validity. Overall results of this examination indicate that minority women fare less well than minority men, just as white women fare less well than white men. It is suggested that minority women are affected by both sex and race discrimination and that they will not have a fair economic or educational opportunity unless and until both types of discrimination are eliminated. Just as efforts to remove racial barriers help minority women as well as minority men, efforts to remove sexual barriers benefit minority women as well as white women. (MJM)

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MINORITY WOMEN & HIGHER EDUCATION # 1

The Project on the Status and Education of Women has received a number of requests for facts about the educational and economic status of minority women -- Black, Spanish speaking, Native American, and Asian-American. Educators are increasingly seeking information about minority women as they attempt to develop realistic, viable programs to benefit them. In response to these queries, the Project has begun a series of brief summaries on the status of minority women. This, the first of this series, focuses on myths about the educational status of black women.

Overall, it is important to keep in mind that all minority group members--both female and male--are, on the average, at an educational disadvantage when compared to whites. In general, however, minority women fare less well than minority men, just as white women fare less well than white men. It is clear that minority women are affected by both sex and race discrimination and that they will not have a fair economic or educational opportunity unless and until both types of discrimination are eliminated. Just as efforts to remove racial barriers help minority women as well as minority men, efforts to remove sexual barriers benefit minority women as well as white women.

BLACK WOMEN IN HIGHER EDUCATION:
A REVIEW OF THEIR CURRENT STATUS

Black women as a group have been long entangled in a web of myths about their educational status. The following pages examine some of these myths, and answer them with current statistics.*

● MYTH: "Black women have always been more educated than black men."

REALITY: The educational history of black people in the United States shows that initially females received less education less often than did black males.

Before emancipation more freed black men than freed black women were taught to read and write, and this pattern continued for several generations after emancipation. From 1880 through 1910 a greater percentage of black females were reported as illiterate (unable to write) by the Census. After 1910 Census data showed that black females began to attain more education and in greater numbers, so that by 1940 equality in education between black men and black women had almost been realized.** 1.2% of black females and 1.3% of black males 25 years or older had completed four or more years of college.

The participation of black men in World War II and the Korean War increased the proportion of black women on college campuses. The number of graduate programs in education established by black institutions in the 1950's also increased the numbers of black women enrolled, since the teaching field has traditionally attracted large numbers of black women.¹

Census data revealed that it was not until the 1960's that the number of black women completing college exceeded the number of black men doing so. In 1966, of blacks 25 to 34 years old, 6.1% of black females and 5.2% of black males had completed four or more years of college.²

Aside from these trends, social factors also played an important part in promulgating the belief that black women were far better educated as a group than black men. Until the mid-fifties and sixties employment opportunities for most black women were limited to domestic service and teaching. The latter was by far the most preferred, and required formal education beyond high school. At the same time, black men could often find a greater variety of employment, which although frequently unstable, did not require as much education.³

* Accurate and comprehensive data on black women (as well as women of other minority groups) are surprisingly difficult to obtain: often statistics are compiled by either sex or race, but not both.

** The reader is reminded that equality of education between whites and blacks, however, has still not been achieved.



MYTH: "Black women are increasing their average level of education more rapidly than black men."

REALITY: Unfortunately the median education level of black women has not risen at the same rate as that for black males.

The table below shows the increase in median level of education in the period from 1966-1972:

INCREASE IN MEDIAN LEVEL OF EDUCATION for persons over 14 years old				
	white male	black male	white female	black female
1972	12.4 yrs.	10.9	12.3	11.1
1966	12.0	9.4	12.2	10.1
increase	.4	1.5	.1	1.0

While the median education level of black females was higher than that of black males, the median education level of black males was increasing much more rapidly. Notice, too, that both black women and men have considerably lower median levels of education than white females or males.

MYTH: "Black males are much more likely to be high school dropouts than black females."

REALITY: Both black males and black females drop out of school at nearly the same rate, although until fairly recently black males were somewhat more likely than black females to drop out of school before attaining the diploma. Statistics now show, however, that the percentage of black male high school dropouts has decreased significantly. Between 1967 and 1972 the number of black males between the ages of 14 and 24 who were high school dropouts dropped from 23.9% to 17.8%. The corresponding decrease for black females was smaller: from 21.8% to 17.2%. Still, black males are more likely to drop out of school than whites of either sex. (In the same time span, the percentage of white female dropouts decreased from 13.1% to 11.9% and the percentage for white male dropouts decreased from 11.6% to 10.7%.)⁶

MYTH: "Black women outnumber black men on the campuses."

REALITY: More black men than black women are now in college. In 1973 19% of black males and 14% of the black females between 18 and 24 were enrolled in college. Overall, 16% of all blacks in this age group were in college. (Of whites in this age group, 25% were in college: 29% of males, 21% of females.)⁷

MYTH: "Black women are not 'serious' about college: they don't stay long enough to obtain their degrees."

REALITY: Black college women are more likely to complete their Bachelor's degree in four years than their brothers.

Data from a study by the American Council on Education show that a majority of 1968 black women freshmen obtained the B.A. in four years:

B.A. DEGREE COMPLETION PERCENTAGES OF BLACK STUDENTS IN FOUR-YEAR COLLEGES ONLY (1972 SENIORS) ⁸			
In White 4-Yr. Colleges		In Black 4-Yr. Colleges	
Black men	Black women	Black men	Black women
49%	59.4%	60%	70.6%

The figures for black women compare favorably with similar figures for all students (white and minority combined): 54.5% of the men and 64.4% of the women in all four-year colleges attained the bachelor's degree in four years (1968-1972).

Similarly, in the 1973-74 academic year at black colleges, women comprised 52% of the total enrollment and received 60% of the bachelor's degrees awarded.⁹

MYTH: "Black women aren't ambitious. They don't really want a college education."

REALITY: The black female freshman is extremely ambitious and motivated. According to the ACE's 1971 Black Freshman Characteristics and Trends, 62.1% of black females rated themselves as "above average in drive to achieve." This was a greater percentage than either black males (59.2%), non-black^{*} males (50.6%) or non-black females (53.4%).

Additional figures regarding degree aspirations of 1971 freshmen further reflect the aspirations of black women students:

	1971 National Norms for Entering Freshmen ¹⁰ all institutions			
	black women	black men	(non-black) women	(non-black) men
aspire to M.A.	38.3%	32.1%	25.7%	25.0%
aspire to Ph.D. & professional degrees	18.1%	25.0%	8.5%	22.5%
totals	56.4%	57.1%	34.2%	47.5%

Several patterns appear here which are worth noting:

1. Overall, black freshmen have higher degree aspirations than white freshmen;
2. About the same percentage of black females and black males aspire to advanced degrees, but black females are over twice as likely to aspire to the Ph.D. than white females.
3. Just as white women have lower aspirations than white men, black women are more likely to aspire to lower degrees than black men.

MYTH: "A high percentage of blacks with doctorates are women!"

REALITY: Many more black men than black women attain advanced degrees. A 1968 survey of professional/doctoral degrees conferred by black institutions found that 91% went to men, and only 9% to women. A 1969 survey conducted by The Ford Foundation found that 94.5% of 1,096 blacks who had obtained doctorates (excluding medical degrees) were male, and only 5.5% were female.¹² (Earlier surveys show a slightly higher percentage of females among black doctorates, but black scholars attribute this to the large number of black women holding doctorates in education.)¹³

These percentages are slightly worse than the percentage of women in the total doctoral population nationally: in 1968, men received 87.2% of all doctorates, women, 12.8%.¹⁴

MYTH: "Once black men achieve full equality, black women won't 'need' as much education."

REALITY: Even if racism disappeared today black women would still face discrimination. While some black women are economically dependent on men, many, many others are not. From 1970 to 1974, the proportion of black families headed by women increased from 28.3 to 34 percent, while the proportion of black husband-wife families declined from 68.1 to 61.8 percent.¹⁵

Additionally, the Bureau of the Census reports that the proportion of black women under the age of 35 remaining single increased nearly 13 percentage points between 1960 and 1973: from 41.2% to 54.1%.¹⁶

Unemployment rates and median earnings further demonstrate that black women are affected by both sex and race discrimination.

* All 1971 freshmen who defined themselves as "Black/Negro/Afro-American" were designated "black" in the norms. All others were designated "non-black."

UNEMPLOYMENT RATES BY SEX AND RACE, 1973¹⁷
(annual averages)

White men	----	4.3
White women	----	5.3
Black men	----	7.9
BLACK WOMEN	----	11.1

MEDIAN EARNINGS BY RACE AND SEX, 1972¹⁸
(for year-round, full time workers)

White men	----	\$10,593
Black men	----	7,301
White women	----	5,998
BLACK WOMEN	----	5,147

Because education is a crucial factor in employment and earning power, these figures clearly point out the need for continued improvement in the educational opportunities for black women.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Jacquelyn Johnson Jackson, "Black Women in a Racist Society" in Racism and Mental Health, ed. Charles V. Willie, Bernard M. Kramer, and Bertram S. Brown (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1973), pp. 215-218.

² Department of Commerce, Social and Economic Statistics Administration, Bureau of the Census, The Social and Economic Status of the Black Population in the United States, 1973 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1974) p. 69.

³ Jackson, "Black Women in a Racist Society," p. 232.

⁴ Department of Commerce, Educational Attainment, March 1972, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1972) pp. 24-28.

⁵ Department of Labor, Wage and Labor Standards Administration, Women's Bureau, Negro Women in the Population and in the Labor Force (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1967) p. 17.

⁶ Department of Commerce, The Social and Economic Status of the Black Population in the United States, 1972 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1973), p. 62.

⁷ Department of Commerce, The Social and Economic Status of the Black Population in the United States, 1973, p. 67.

⁸ These data were provided by Engin Holstrom, Office of Research and Policy Analysis, American Council on Education, One Dupont Circle, Washington, D.C. 20036.

⁹ These data were provided by Linda Jackson, Management Information Systems, Institute for Services to Education, 2001 S St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20009.

¹⁰ Alan E. Bayer, The Black College Freshman: Characteristics and Recent Trends (Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education, 1972), pp. 25, 27.

¹¹ Constance M. Carroll, "Three's a Crowd: The Dilemma of the Black Woman in Higher Education" in Academic Women on the Move, ed. Alice S. Rossi and Ann Calderwood (New York: Russell Sage, 1973), p. 171.

¹² The Ford Foundation, A Survey of Black American Doctorates (New York: Ford Foundation, 1969) p. 6.

¹³ Horace Mann Bond, Black American Scholars, A Study of Their Beginnings (Detroit: Balamp Publishing, 1972), p. 80.

¹⁴ National Research Council, Office of Scientific Personnel, Summary Report 1972, Doctorate Recipients from United States Universities (Washington, D.C.: National Research Council, 1973), p. 2.

¹⁵ Department of Commerce, The Social and Economic Status of the Black Population in the United States 1973, p. 73.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 91.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 49.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 59.